
Meeting and Convention Planners

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Significant Points

- Planners often work long hours in the period prior to and during a meeting or convention, and extensive travel may be required.
- Employment is expected to grow faster than average.
- Opportunities will be best for individuals with a bachelor's degree and some meeting planning experience.

Nature of the Work

Meetings and conventions bring people together for a common purpose, and meeting and convention planners work to ensure that this purpose is achieved seamlessly. Meeting planners coordinate every detail of meetings and conventions, from the speakers and meeting location to arranging for printed materials and audio-visual equipment. Meeting and convention planners work for nonprofit organizations, professional and similar associations, hotels, corporations, and government. Some organizations have internal meeting planning staffs, and others hire independent meeting and convention planning firms to organize their events.

The first step in planning a meeting or convention is determining the purpose, message, or impression that the sponsoring organization wants to communicate. Planners increasingly focus on how meetings impact the goals of their organizations; for example, they may survey prospective attendees to find out what motivates them and how they learn best. Planners then choose speakers, entertainment, and content, and arrange the program to present the organization's information in the most effective way.

Meeting and convention planners search for prospective meeting sites, which may be hotels, convention centers, or conference centers. They issue requests for proposals—documents that state the meeting dates and outline their needs for the meeting or convention, including meeting and exhibit space, lodging, food and beverages, telecommunications, audio-visual requirements, transportation, and any other necessities—to all the sites in which they are interested. The establishments respond with proposals describing what space and services they can supply, and at what prices. Meeting and convention planners review these proposals and either make recommendations to top management or choose the site themselves.

Once the location is selected, meeting and convention planners arrange support services, coordinate needs with the facility, prepare the site staff for the meeting, and set up all forms of electronic communication needed for the meeting or convention, such as e-mail, voice mail, video, and online communication.

Meeting logistics, the management of the details of meetings and conventions, such as labor and materials, is another major component of the job. Planners register attendees and issue name badges, coordinate lodging reservations, and arrange transportation. They make sure that all necessary supplies are ordered and transported to the meeting site on time, that meeting rooms are equipped with sufficient seating and audio-visual equipment, that all exhibits and booths are set up properly, and that all materials are printed. They also make sure that the meeting adheres to fire and labor regulations and oversee food and beverage distribution.

There also is a financial management component of the work. Planners negotiate contracts with facilities and suppliers. These contracts, which have become increasingly complex, are often drawn up more than a year in advance of the meeting or convention. Contracts may include clauses requiring the planner to book a certain number

of rooms for meeting attendees and imposing penalties if the rooms are not filled. Therefore, it is important that the planner is able to closely estimate how many people will attend the meeting, based on previous meeting attendance and current circumstances. Planners must also oversee the finances of meetings and conventions. They are given overall budgets by their organizations and must create a detailed budget, forecasting what each aspect of the event will cost. Additionally, some planners oversee meetings that contribute significantly to their organization's operating budget and must ensure the meeting meets income goals.

An increasingly important part of the work is measuring how well the meeting's purpose was achieved, and planners begin this measurement as they outline the meeting's goals. Planners set their own specific goals after learning an organization's goals for a meeting or convention. They choose objectives for which success is measurable and define what will constitute achievement of each goal. The most obvious way to gauge their success is to have attendees fill out surveys about their experiences at the event. Planners can ask specific questions about what the attendees learned, how well organized the meeting or convention appeared, and how they felt about the overall experience. If the purpose of a meeting or convention is publicity, a good measure of success would be how much press coverage the event received. A more precise measurement of meeting success, and one that is gaining importance, is return on investment. Planners compare the costs and benefits of an event and show whether it was worthwhile to the organization. For example, if a company holds a meeting to motivate its employees and improve company morale, the planner might track employee turnover before and after the meeting.

An important part of all these different functions of meeting professionals is establishing and maintaining relationships. Meeting and convention planners interact with a variety of people and must communicate effectively. They must understand their organization's goals for the meeting or convention, be able to communicate their needs clearly to meeting site staff and other suppliers, maintain contact with many different people, and inform people about changes as they occur.

Some aspects of the work vary by the type of organization for which planners work. Those who work for associations must market their meetings to association members, convincing members that attending the meeting is worth their time and expense. Marketing is usually less important for corporate meeting planners because employees are generally required to attend company meetings. Corporate planners usually have shorter time frames in which to prepare their meetings. Planners who work in Federal, State, and local governments must learn how to operate within established government procedures, such as procedures and rules for procuring materials and booking lodging for government employees.

Convention service managers, meeting professionals who work in hotels, convention centers, and similar establishments, act as liaisons between the meeting facility and association, corporate, or government planners. They present food service options to outside planners, coordinate special requests, suggest hotel services based on the planners' budgets, and otherwise help outside planners present effective meetings and conventions in their facilities.

Meeting planners in small organizations perform a wider range of duties, with perhaps one person coordinating an entire meeting. These planners usually need to multi-task even more than planners in larger organizations.

In large organizations or those that sponsor large meetings or conventions, meeting professionals are more likely to specialize in a particular aspect of meeting planning. Some specialties are conference coordinators, who handle most of the meeting logis-

tics; registrars, who handle advance registration and payment, name badges, and the set-up of on-site registration; and education planners, who coordinate the meeting content, including speakers and topics. In organizations that hold very large or complex meetings, there may be several senior positions, such as manager of registration, education seminar coordinator, or conference services director, with the entire meeting planning department headed by a department director.

Working Conditions

The work of meeting and convention planners may be considered either stressful or energizing, but there is no question that it is fast-paced and demanding. Planners oversee multiple operations at one time, face numerous deadlines, and orchestrate the activities of several different groups of people. Meeting and convention planners spend the majority of their time in offices; but during meetings, they work on-site at the hotel, convention center, or other meeting location. They travel regularly to attend meetings and to visit prospective meeting sites. The extent of travel depends upon the type of organization for which the planner works. Local and regional organizations require mostly regional travel, while national and international organizations require travel to more distant locales, including travel abroad. Working hours can be long and irregular, with planners working more than 40 hours per week in the time leading up to a meeting and fewer hours after finishing a large meeting. During meetings or conventions, planners may work very long days, possibly starting as early as 5:00 a.m. and working until midnight. They are sometimes required to work on weekends.

Some physical activity is required, including long hours of standing and walking, and some lifting and carrying of boxes of materials, exhibits, or supplies. Planners work with the public and with workers from diverse backgrounds. They may get to travel to beautiful hotels and interesting places and meet speakers and meeting attendees from around the world, and they usually enjoy a high level of autonomy.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Meeting and convention planners can qualify for their jobs through a variety of methods. Many migrate into the occupation from other occupations when they are given meeting planning duties in addition to their other duties. For example, an administrative assistant may begin planning small meetings and gradually move into a full-time position as a meeting and convention planner. Others with a variety of educational or work backgrounds may seek out meeting and convention planning positions. Although there are some certification programs and college and university courses in meeting and convention planning available, a large proportion of the skills needed is learned on the job and through experience.

Many employers prefer a person with a bachelor's degree, but this is not always required. The proportion with a bachelor's degree is increasing because the work and responsibilities are becoming more complex, causing employers to prefer workers with more formal education. Planners have backgrounds in a variety of disciplines, but some useful undergraduate majors are marketing, public relations, communications, business, and hotel or hospitality management. A few schools offer courses or degree programs in meeting and event management. Individuals who have studied hospitality management may start out with greater responsibilities than those with other academic backgrounds. Because formal education is increasingly important, those who enter the occupation may enhance their professional standing by enrolling in meeting planning courses offered



Tax examiners, collectors, and revenue agents review tax returns, conduct audits, and collect overdue taxes.

by professional meeting and convention planning organizations, colleges, or universities.

Others enter the occupation after working in hotel sales or as marketing or catering coordinators. These are effective ways to learn about meeting and convention planning because these hotel personnel work with numerous meeting planners, participate in negotiations for hotel services, and witness many different meetings. Workers who enter the occupation in these ways often start at a higher level than those with bachelor's degrees and no experience.

Meeting and convention planners must have excellent written and verbal communications skills and interpersonal skills. They must be detail-oriented with excellent organizational skills, and they must be able to multi-task, meet tight deadlines, and maintain composure under pressure in a fast-paced environment. Quantitative and analytic skills are needed to formulate and follow budgets and to understand and negotiate contracts. The ability to speak multiple languages is a plus, since some planners must communicate with meeting attendees and speakers from around the world. They also need computer skills, such as the ability to use financial and registration software and the Internet. In the course of their careers, planners may work in a number of different, unrelated industries, and they must be able to learn independently about each new industry so they can coordinate programs that address the industry's important issues.

Entry-level planners, depending upon their education, generally begin by performing small tasks under the supervision of senior meeting professionals. For example, they may issue requests for proposals and discuss the resulting proposals with higher level planners. They also may assist in registration, review of contracts, or the creation of meeting timelines, schedules, or objectives. They may start by planning small meetings, such as committee meetings. Those who start at small organizations have the opportunity to learn more quickly, since they will be required to take on a larger number of tasks.

To advance in this occupation, planners must volunteer to take on more responsibility and find new and better ways of doing things in their organizations. The most important factors are demonstrated skill on the job, determination, and gaining the respect of others within the organization. Advancement based solely on education is uncommon. On the other hand, education may improve work performance, and therefore may be an important factor in career development.

As meeting and convention planners prove themselves, they are given greater responsibilities. This may mean taking on a wider range of duties or moving to another planning specialty to gain experience in that area before moving to a higher level. For example, a planner may be promoted from conference coordinator, with responsibility for meeting logistics, to program coordinator, with responsibility for booking speakers and formatting the meeting's program. The next step up may be meeting manager, who supervises all parts of the meeting, and then director of meetings, and then possibly department director of meetings and education. Another path for promotion is to move from a small organization to a larger one, taking on responsibility for larger meetings and conventions.

At least two universities offer bachelor's degrees with majors in meetings management. Additionally, meeting and convention planning continuing education programs are offered by a few universities and colleges. These programs are designed for career development of meeting professionals as well as for people wishing to enter the occupation. Some programs may require 40 to more than 100 classroom hours during a period of one semester to two years for a certificate of completion.

The Convention Industry Council offers the Certified Meeting Professional (CMP) credential, a voluntary certification for meeting and convention planners. Although the CMP is not required, it is widely recognized in the industry and may help in career advancement. In order to qualify, candidates must have a minimum of three years of meeting management experience, full-time employment in a meeting management capacity, and proof of accountability for successfully completed meetings. Those who qualify must then pass an examination that covers topics such as adult learning, financial management, facilities and services, logistics, and meeting programs.

With significant experience, meeting planners may become independent meeting consultants, advance to vice presidents or executive directors of associations, or start their own meeting planning firms.

Employment

Meeting and convention planners held about 43,000 jobs in 2004. About 30 percent worked for religious, grantmaking, civic, professional, and similar organizations; 17 percent worked for hotels and other accommodation establishments; 9 percent worked for public and private schools, colleges, universities, and training centers; 6 percent worked for governments; and 6 percent were self-employed. The rest were employed by convention and trade show organizing firms and in other industries as corporate meeting and convention planners.

Job Outlook

Employment of meeting and convention planners is expected to grow faster than the average for all occupations over the 2004–14 period, due to growth of business, the increasing globalization of the economy, and increasing use of electronic forms of communication to bring people together. There will also be some job openings that arise due to the need to replace workers who leave the workforce or transfer to other occupations. Opportunities will be best for individuals with a bachelor's degree and some meeting planning experience.

As businesses and organizations become increasingly international, meetings and conventions become even more important. In organizations that span the country or the globe, the periodic meeting is increasingly the only time the organization can bring all of its members together. Despite the proliferation of alternative forms of communication, such as e-mail, videoconferencing, and the Web, face-to-face interaction is still a necessity. In fact, new forms of communication foster interaction and connect individuals and groups that previously would not have collaborated. By increasing the number of human connections, electronic forms of communication actually increase the demand for meetings, which may offer the only opportunity for these people to interact in person.

Industries that are experiencing high growth tend to experience corresponding growth in meetings and conferences. For example, the medical and pharmaceutical sectors in particular, because of their high growth and their knowledge-intensive natures, will experience large increases in meeting activity. However, these increases will spur employment growth of meeting professionals in medical and pharmaceutical associations rather than in the industries directly. Professional associations hold conferences and conventions that offer the continuing education, training, and opportunities to exchange ideas that are vital to medical and pharmaceutical professionals. Unlike workers in some occupations, meeting and convention planners can often change industries relatively easily, so they often are able to move to different industries in response to the growth or declines in particular sectors of the economy.

Partly because of bioterrorism and homeland security issues, Government agencies are now holding more meetings than ever. Private security and insurance companies also have increased their meeting activity. Because the Government increasingly outsources its non-core functions, this increased activity may spur demand for independent meeting consultants or workers in private meeting planning firms rather than increasing employment of Government meeting planners.

Demand for corporate meeting planners is highly susceptible to business cycle fluctuations since meetings are usually among the first expenses to be cut when budgets are tight. For associations, fluctuations are less pronounced because meetings are generally a source of revenue rather than an expense. However, since fewer people are able to attend association meetings during recessions, associations often reduce their meeting staffs as well. Associations for industries such as health care, in which meeting attendance is required for professionals to maintain their licensure, are the least likely to experience cutbacks during downturns in the economy.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of meeting and convention planners in May 2004 were \$39,620. The middle 50 percent earned between \$31,180 and \$50,790. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$24,660, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$65,060. In May 2004, me-

dian annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of meeting and convention planners were as follows:

Business, professional, labor, political, and similar organizations	\$43,100
Traveler accommodation.....	36,440

Related Occupations

Meeting and convention planners work to communicate a particular message or impression about an organization, as do public relations specialists. They coordinate the activities of several operations to create a service for large numbers of people, using organizational, logistical, communication, budgeting, and interpersonal skills. Food service managers use the same skills for similar purposes. Like meeting and convention planners, producers and directors coordinate a range of activities to produce a television show or movie, negotiate contracts, and communicate with a wide variety of people. Travel agents also use similar skills, such as interacting with many people and coordinating travel arrangements, including hotel accommodations, transportation, and advice on destinations.

Sources of Additional Information

For information about meeting planner certification, contact:

► Convention Industry Council, 8201 Greensboro Dr., Suite 300, McLean, VA 22102. Internet: <http://www.conventionindustry.org>

For information about internships and on-campus student meeting planning organizations, contact:

► Professional Convention Management Association, 2301 S. Lake Shore Dr., Suite 1001, Chicago, IL 60616-1419. Internet: <http://www.pcma.org>

For information about meeting planning education, entering the profession, and career paths, contact:

► Meeting Professionals International, 3030 LBJ Fwy., Suite 1700, Dallas, TX 75244-5903. Internet: <http://www.mpiweb.org>